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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 001338

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SUBJECT: FARC CONTINUES HOSTAGE RELEASE STRATEGY TO STAY IN
POLITICAL SPOTLIGHT

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The FARC offered to release police hostage Pablo Moncayo in response to requests from "Colombians for Peace," the Piedad Cordoba-led group which advocates a humanitarian exchange. Peace Commissioner Frank Pearl told the Ambassador the GOC could not accept a humanitarian accord, and said it would be impossible for the GOC to work through Cordoba. He said the GOC sees no sign that the FARC is interested in peace, but added that the GOC is seeking direct contact with the FARC through the Catholic Church. Father Dario Echeverri confirmed that Pearl had authorized the Church to tell the FARC that the GOC wants direct talks, adding that Pearl also authorized him to say that Uribe's demand that the group unilaterally halt criminal acts for four months as a condition for talks was media posturing. End Summary.

FARC OFFERS TO RELEASE ANOTHER HOSTAGE

2. (U) The FARC issued a communique on April 16 announcing its intention to unilaterally release Police Corporal Pablo Moncayo, held hostage by the group since 1998. Moncayo's father, Gustavo Moncayo, has been a leader in pushing for a humanitarian exchange of FARC-held hostages for FARC fighters. The FARC voiced support for the "Colombians for Peace" group, and said it would release Moncayo in response to requests from the group's leader, Senator Piedad Cordoba, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, and Moncayo. The FARC also praised the Catholic Church's recent call for a "political solution" to the conflict, and rejected President Uribe's call for a unilateral cease-fire as a condition for peace talks.

3. (U) In a separate communique, the FARC apologized for the February massacre of eight Awa indigenous in Narino Department, blamed military offensives in the area for the act, and offered to assign three commanders to "coordinate" with the Awa to avoid future incidents.

CORDOBA RENEWS CALLS FOR HUMANITARIAN EXCHANGE

4. (U) Cordoba welcomed the FARC statements and urged the GOC to engage the group in humanitarian exchange talks. She called GOC silence in response to the FARC's communique "worrying." Cordoba said that if the GOC was concerned about a FARC "show" through unilateral hostage releases, it could

address this concern by negotiating a humanitarian exchange. She said the FARC's hostages--who she called "prisoners of war"--were her main concern. Cordoba added that she was not thinking about a possible run for president to focus on exchange and peace talks.

¶5. (C) Former FARC-held hostage and ex-Meta Governor Alan Jara told us that Cordoba was "not objective." Still, he said the GOC should attempt to use her to gain the release of military and Police hostages since she "is trusted by the FARC." Jara, who is a member of "Colombians for Peace," said he would seek meetings with the GOC to press for a humanitarian accord. He conceded that it would be an error to make concessions to the FARC, but said the group's decision to drop its demand for a demilitarized zone showed new flexibility.

GOC REMAINS PESSIMISTIC ON TALKS WITH FARC

¶6. (C) Reintegration and Peace Commissioner Frank Pearl told the Ambassador on April 15 that it would be difficult to advance in peace negotiations with the FARC prior to the 2010 presidential elections. As in the past, the FARC is attempting to influence the electoral agenda by building up a "peace candidate" who would be sympathetic to its interests. In 2006, its candidate was Alvaro Leyva; today it is Piedad Cordoba. Pearl noted that the GOC needs to be careful in handling this issue, since the FARC's release of some hostages resonates with the Colombian public and gives the group a tool to pressure the GOC. Still, he said the GOC could not accept a humanitarian exchange because it would

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create two classes of hostages (economic versus political).

¶7. (C) Pearl said the GOC does not believe in negotiations through the media or other intermediaries or talks which involve multiple actors (civil society, the Europeans, etc). The GOC believes any negotiation should be in stages, with the initial phase involving discreet, direct talks between the GOC and the FARC. Other actors could be invited in at later stages as appropriate.

¶8. (C) Pearl said it is impossible to negotiate through Cordoba or "Colombians for Peace," and confirmed that he has not met with Cordoba. He said the GOC has received information that Cordoba is trying to arrange to receive the remains of Army Major Guevara (who died while held hostage by the FARC) from the FARC as well as proof of life for other hostages. Pearl said recovery of the remains would be complicated, since the Fiscalía and Medical Examiner would need to accompany any mission. Pearl suggested that Brazil could play a useful role in this process.

¶9. (C) Pearl reiterated Uribe's statement that the GOC would open talks with the FARC only if the group stopped criminal acts for four months, but added that Uribe would not insist on disarmament/demobilization as an immediate step. Still, the FARC's disarmament and demobilization would have to be the final goal of any peace process. He said the GOC has authorized the Catholic Church to transmit to the FARC that the GOC is willing to talk with the group, but has not received a response.

¶10. (C) Pearl attributed the FARC's intransigence to FARC leader Alfonso Cano's need to consolidate his leadership over the group. He said Cano remains focused rebuilding the FARC's operational capabilities, scoring some military successes, and reestablishing the group as a political actor. Cano has had some success on the military front, and Pearl voiced his view that the FARC is far from being defeated. He said the group retains approximately 8000 fighters, and the Secretariat still exercises command and control over its fronts.

CATHOLIC CHURCH EFFORTS

¶11. (C) Father Dario Echeverri confirmed that Pearl--acting on Uribe's instructions--had met with Catholic Bishops Conference President Ruben Salazar and himself the week of April 13 and asked them to pass to the FARC that the GOC wants direct, personal talks with the group. He also authorized the Church to say that Uribe's public demand that the FARC unilaterally halt criminal actions for four months as a condition for talks was only media posturing. Echeverri conceded the Church's difficulties in contacting the FARC, but said he had recently received a request from FARC Commander Grannobles to meet in Venezuela to discuss the FARC-ELN conflict in Arauca, as well as greetings from FARC Secretariat member Pablo Catatumbo. The Church also continues to reach out through various Bishops respected by the group.

¶12. (C) Echeverri said the Church also supports three, separate civil society initiatives to promote a public consensus on the minimal elements needed to achieve peace in Colombia. He cited the National Conciliation Commission's effort to promote a national accord, Catholic Bishop Nel Beltran's initiative with political and civil society leaders, and Juan Mayr's initiative to promote private sector involvement in peace and reconciliation efforts. Echeverri said the Church has not contacted Cordoba or "Colombians for Peace." Echeverri said the FARC clearly supports Cordoba, but he doubted that the FARC sees her as the only channel for talks with the GOC.
BROWNFIELD